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Racism, Culture and Modernity

Joost van Loon

Banal Nationalism

by Michael Billig

London: Sage, 1995

Culture, Multiculture, Postculture

by Joel S. Kahn

London: Sage, 1995

Racism, Modernity and Identity on the Western Front

by Ali Rattansi and Sallie Westwood (eds)

Cambridge: Polity, 1994

The Arena of Racism

by Michel Wieviorka

London: Sage, 1995

(Translation of *L'Espace du racisme*

[translated by Chris Turner]

Paris: Les Editions du Seuil, 1991)

IN THE last two decades, there has been a gradual but persistent shift of emphasis within critical theories of race and racism, away from a pre-occupation with political economic structures of domination, towards a broader conceptualization in which race and racism are inherently linked to ideas of (post)modernity. Since the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978 and Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* in 1983, there has been a steep increase of interest in theorizing modernity in terms of racialization, through deconstructing (post)colonial discourses. Consequently, more thorough and persistent consideration has been given to the (arbitrary)

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- *Theory, Culture & Society* 1997 (SAGE, London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi), Vol. 14(3): 157–164 [0263-2764(199708)14:3;1-D]

constructions of (Western) selves and (non-Western) others in the context of modernity, not simply as a system of political-economic domination, but as involving the materiality of cultural differentiation.

One consequence of this broadening of 'explorations' of race-related issues is a more articulated appraisal of the cultural factor. This in turn has forced theories of race, racism and racialization to engage in critical re-examinations of the adjacent issues of ethnicity and ethnocentrism and nationality and nationalism. Race, ethnicity and nationhood are three concepts which cannot be by-passed in any attempt to theorize the cultural and social forms of modernity. Slowly but steadily the message seems to be being hammered home that racism, ethnocentrism and nationalism are more than merely pathological excesses of modernization. That is, the articulation of these so-called 'particularisms' is not antithetical to the universalist aspirations inherent in modernity, but has been central to it from the outset (see also Bhabha, 1994; Goldberg, 1993). In the wake of this recognition, there has been a resurgence of interest in cultural difference.

Joel Kahn's *Culture, Multiculture, Postculture* could be read as an attempt to demonstrate that the cultural differentialist perspective, often associated with postcolonialism and postmodernism, has been part of modernity all along. In this book, he investigates a wide range of cultural texts and comments on culture, varying from Dutch colonial discourse and anthropological writings on the Netherlands East Indies, to Bela Bartók's famously acclaimed musicological studies and interpretations of peasant music, and finally returns to the 'postmodern' America of the 1980s and 1990s. He is highly critical of ahistorical and socially decontextualized notions of 'culture' which can, for example, be traced in the work of post-modern thinkers such as Baudrillard and Lyotard. '[W]hat is perhaps most striking about all this debate on culture and cultural difference is how little it appears to relate to the world outside the academy' (p. 154).

This book provides an attempt to locate the 1920s as a critical period in the analysis of cultural difference in which the particular was reclaimed from the clutches of modernist universalism, without the romantic introspective limitations of earlier German idealism (or what he calls the 'expressionists') who were mainly interested in cultural difference to expose the failures of Enlightenment and the uniqueness of the German spirit. By bringing a much needed historical sensitivity to writings on cultural difference, Kahn effectively shows that if there is such a thing as postmodernity, then it must be associated with a particularly modern sensibility to cultural difference. The interwar years were marked by rapid social transformations, not only in the West, but in various parts of the colonized world as well. These socioeconomic, political and technological changes radically disrupted the (universalist, hegemonic, homogenizing) value-systems inherited from the Enlightenment. The persistence of peasant cultures, which were not simply the archaic reminders of a past world, for example, shows that economic alienation of peasants from the means of production did not dispossess them of ways of making sense of these processes. Intellectuals, too, were living

under increasingly disjunct and turbulent social transformations (as part of the rising new middle classes).

Kahn presents a socially situated history of modernity as passing from a notion of 'culture' that was firmly rooted in a tradition which juxtaposed European civilization on to Enlightenment philosophy and often acclaimed to justify colonialist expansion, to that of 'multiculture' in which the coexistence of different cultures was recognized. As the title suggests, the notion of 'postculture' could mark a second transition within modernity, one with which our (erotic) obsession with cultural difference has become global (pp. 122, 125). In this allegedly 'postcultural world' (which he does not really distinguish from the culture of postmodernism and postcolonialism), there seems to be a new drive to homogenization of cultural difference, paradoxically, in the name of cultural difference. In the final chapter, Kahn criticizes globalization theorists (in general) for failing to pay attention to what 'global culture' means (and for whom). In positing that 'culture is a cultural construction' (p. 128), which allowed it to be taken up within a wide range of (often antagonistic) discourses, he argues for a hermeneutic anthropology as 'a challenge to attempts by hegemonic groups to impose their particular vision of the human condition onto others' (p. 137).

A similar concern with tracing the resurgence of debates of cultural difference, in particular concerning racism, in the specifically modern articulation of the dialectics of the universal and the particular, can be found in the edited collection entitled *Racism, Modernity and Identity on the Western Front*, by Ali Rattansi and Sallie Westwood. This work consists of nine essays plus an introduction in which the editors delineate an attempt to reconfigure the terms of the debates on racism in the light of substantial social, political, economic and cultural transformations in modernity, and that of the Western world in particular, as well as recent challenges that have been brought forward by postcolonialism, the writing-back of the Other. Although the book is structured in four parts, it basically brings together two distinct approaches to theorizing racism: a descriptive-cultural and an explanatory-sociological one. The first is slightly more prominent in this collection and can be found in the essays by Rattansi, Slater, Nederveen-Pieterse, Young and Westwood. The second approach is central to the essays by Wieviorka (whose book *The Arena of Racism* will be discussed separately below), Miles, Lloyd and Winant.

Of those essays concerned with theorizing racism in the context of culture, those by Robert Young, entitled 'Egypt in America' and Sallie Westwood, entitled 'Racism, Mental Illness and the Politics of Identity', are the most innovative and exciting contributions. In a rather sympathetic critique of Bernal's *Black Athena*, Young upholds Bernal's conclusion that far from being autonomous, Greek civilization was heavily influenced by and dependent upon earlier Egyptian civilizations. In other words, the idea of an endogenous European civilization that emerged with the spreading of modern thought in the 18th and 19th centuries, required considerable historical revisions which denied the influence of non-Caucasian

civilizations on that of Ancient Greece. However, while Bernal argued that this required a writing-away of Egyptian influences out of the origin and history of Greek civilization, Young asserts that, in particular in the USA, an alliance was struck in the 19th century between the biological sciences (in particular those concerned with race-typology), anthropology and archaeology (Egyptology) to 'prove' that Egyptian civilization was essentially Caucasian. This alliance was struck on the basis of 'the desire to produce a scholarly, academic justification for slavery' (p. 160).

In an attempt to provide a sociological account of this desire, Young argues that in the USA, modernity's particular paradox of universalism and particularism became increasingly evident in the 19th century with the debates about the abolition of slavery. This in turn prompted questions of legitimation and led to the emergence of a new mode of thought which 'set up whites as absolute and distinct and considered all non-white races only in terms of how much they deviated from the illustrious Caucasian standard' (p. 160). In the final section of this essay, Young extends his argument by appropriating Deleuze and Guattari's observation that, far from operating distinct categories of purity, race was conceived in modern thought in terms of deviances, that is impurity (p. 167). This explains why racialization is so intimately connected to sexuality and desire, taboo and the fear of racial mixing.

The association of 'race' with impurity finds a critical resonance in Sallie Westwood's essay on the connections between mental illness and racism. She sets this up by referring to the fact that in Britain, racial and ethnic minorities, and in particular young African-Caribbean males, are disproportionately diagnosed as schizophrenic. On the basis of in-depth interviews with 17 'black' people, diagnosed as schizophrenic, she concludes that racism plays a significant part in what she calls 'the narratives of sickness' (p. 255). The racial bias in schizophrenia is overdetermined by racism: first, as an intervention in the life experiences of its victims and thus constitutive of their narratives of sickness; second, as part of the very psychiatric apparatus which diagnoses and treats people as 'mentally ill'.

As with Young's insightful analysis of the symbiosis of Egyptology and biology, Westwood implies that race is primarily framed not by notions of purity, but by an anxiety about impurity. She thereby brings to light an extremely important but often ignored aspect of Fanon's work on the psycho-social structures of racialization and sexualization in which the Other is always already pathologized as the deviant. Westwood develops this further in relation to what has been called 'the politics of identities' which structure the narratives of sickness. These, she argues, are deeply ingrained in the decline of the hegemony of Britishness which has resulted in increasingly introspective, narrowly defined margins of normality, imposing a sense of not-belonging, unhomeliness and exteriority, on to those that deviate, that is, the racialized (p. 261).

Whereas the essays by Young and Westwood provide stimulating

descriptions of the ways in which the racialization–sexualization nexus exposes the limits of modernity, they do not explicitly deal with the changing conditions of racism in the face of a crisis in legitimation, which cannot be disconnected from the failures of the modernizing project itself. The limits of Western modernity have been part and parcel of the modern from its inception and their work is not geared to providing adequate explanations of why these should have become intensified more recently.

More thoroughly grounded sociological explanations of the changing realities of racism can be found in the section entitled ‘Racism and Modernity in Europe’, which contains essays by Michel Wieviorka, Robert Miles and Cathie Lloyd. In these three essays, the authors develop sociological analyses of the changing characteristics of racism and anti-racism in Europe. Carefully considering the empirical ‘realities’ of the different manifestations of racism and anti-semitism in Europe, all three agree that there have been major and significant changes in the ways in which such racisms have become manifest in Europe since the Second World War. However, whereas Wieviorka and Lloyd both trace these transformations in the growing disjunction between the social and the communal, that is, the modernist variant of the dialectic of the universal and the particular, Miles is critical of Wieviorka’s emphasis on a great (post-industrial) transformation as engendering a rise in racism. He is less inclined to see a sharp discontinuity between the manifestations of racism today and in the past because he places central emphasis on the contradictions of ‘capitalism’ rather than modernity.

Wieviorka’s book *The Arena of Racism* was originally published in French in 1991. It has been labelled by among others Rattansi and Miles as providing an explanation of racism from a post-industrialist perspective. Although Wieviorka never uses that term himself, he does dwell explicitly on the work of Touraine, of whom he has been a long-standing associate. *The Arena of Racism* consists of an extremely powerful and meticulously developed set of arguments. It consists of three parts. In the first, he sets out that rather than studying ‘race’, we should be concerned with developing a sociology of racism, which – unlike race – has an empirical referent (p. 1). He therefore pays closer attention to defining racism by discussing its emergence in sociology, psychology and political science. Although these chapters often resemble, albeit in a shortened version, the work of Banton (1977) on ‘the idea of race’ and his denunciation of race as an explanatory principle is merely a repetition of similar claims made for example by Banton and Miles, the speed by which he arrives at such conclusions and the scope within which he makes this possible, are very impressive and could serve extremely well to introduce undergraduates effectively to a sociological critique of the idea of race (p. 34).

In Part Two, entitled ‘The Elementary Forms of Racism’, Wieviorka asserts that racism is a form of action (rather than a relation, attitude or ideology). Essential to his analysis is his postulate that racism operates in

different degrees and intensities. He separates the various infra-political (racism as a fragmented ensemble of events and discourses) from the political (racism as an ideologically integrated socio-political force) forms (p. 40) to set up a distinction between inegalitarian and differentialist racism. Whereas the first is mobilized to legitimate and fix structures of inequality along racialized lines, the second is more totalitarian and directed to a full exclusion, if not extermination, of those defined as other (p. 44). In practice, these types always come together, although in different combinations. Whereas the racism in the USA has traditionally been more of an egalitarian type, the German form of fascism as anti-semitism is of the differentialist type.

In Part Three ('The Unity of Racism') Wieviorka moves from a classification of racisms to an explanation of the shift in the form of racism in the 1970s in Europe and the USA. Central in this argument is what he calls the 'destructuration of social movements' (p. 86), in particular that of the workers, who, following the erosion of the industrial core in Western societies and the collapse of the welfare state, have slowly but steadily lost a central mobilizing potential for political action. Consequently, the loss of the unity of social movements based on relations of production, often accompanied by a crisis of the state, causes an increased disjunction between 'the social' and 'the communal' (p. 111). This is central to the paradox of modernity, in which the universal (progress) is always framed by the particular (nation, community, ideology, religion, culture, identity). In the space opened by the dislocation of the social and the communal, racism emerges either to restore the unity of a particular modernity over and above particular identities, or to assert the complete autonomy of particular identities vis-a-vis modernity (pp. 122–3). Whereas the first is more likely to result in inegalitarian racism which can be maintained at the infra-political level, the second has a tendency to produce differentialist racism which always has a greater capacity to engender forms of political action in which violence is a highly endemic and organized strategy (p. 120).

The strength of Wieviorka's account lies in his consistent use of particular concepts with sound empirical observations. More than mere illustrations, they provide a grounding of his theoretical arguments. A similar strength can be identified with Michael Billig's *Banal Nationalism*. Billig's work operates on the intersections between social psychology, discourse analysis and ideology critique. In this work, he provides a lucidly argued and well-developed thesis of the persistence of nationalism in a world marked by the disappearance of fixed boundaries and identities. By being too much concerned with the excessive, exceptional and exotic forms of nationalism, Billig argues, most social scientists have not developed an adequate explanation of the ways in which the nation becomes 'enhabited' (pp. 42, 15–19).

Enhabitation ensures that the nation acquires a silent omnipresence in discourses and practices of everyday life, that is, in routine forms of remembering without conscious awareness (p. 42). It allows the 'nation' to

be at once universal and particular. Universal, because everyone 'has' a national identity; particular because one always belongs to one specific nation (pp. 24, 73). The nation is 'flagged' in everyday language in rather mystified, mythological and uneventful ways (p. 105). Nationalism is primarily embodied in such banalities as the unwaved flag outside a public building, the organization of sporting events, the language used by media, politicians, weathermen, and philosophers, such as Richard Rorty. Rorty's philosophical pragmatism, which Billig terms *Pax Americana*, is a communitarian philosophy which starts from the recognition that all interpretations are necessarily limited by the tradition in which they emerge, that is, the nationhood of the interpreter. However, far from disposing the interpreter of the capacity to make value judgements about cultural exteriorities, Rorty has made it clear that his (explicitly American) version of pragmatism is the most reasonable mode of thought. It is a post-Cold War philosophy, that proposes 'a non-ideological message for non-ideological times', which – in Rorty's case – is 'the American way' (p. 172). Billig argues that the alleged non-ideological and self-proclaimed superiority of this philosophical nationalism is merely furthering the enhabitation of banal nationalism, through a legitimization in philosophical discourse.

By criticizing the superficial distinction that is often made between (healthy) patriotism and (extreme) nationalism (which can also be found in Rorty's more popular writings), Billig points out that far from the exception, nationalism is the order of the day. Banal nationalism operates beyond the playing of the patriotic card by politicians and structures the very core of modern life. Central to his thesis is that the nation is realized in the 'dialectics of remembering and forgetting' (p. 37). Its banalities allow us to forget that we are constantly reminded of the omnipresence and persistence of the nation, without the necessity of this taking the form of an exceptional event, that is, a national crisis, war or disaster. 'Daily newspapers and logomaniac politicians constantly flag the world of nations' (p. 174). He explores the mechanisms of this dialectics of remembering and forgetting via a pragmatic analysis of what he calls *homeland deixis* (p. 105). Here, the nation becomes signified in the smallest of words: the, this/that, here/there, us/them, now/then. These words *index* the nation, by pointing towards on the one hand its specific locality that is implied as that of the speaker and on the other hand, the difference this pointing towards makes. 'The homeland is made both present and unnoticeable by being presented as *the context*' (p. 109). This becomes most clear in notions such as '*the country*', '*the prime-minister*', or '*the economy*', which index a particular situation as a self-evident context, beyond which nothing can be. In other words, the particular becomes universal.

Billig's careful analysis should function as a warning to all those who still believe that the nation and the nation-state are likely to disappear in an increasingly postmodernizing, globalizing new world order. And from the essays collected by Rattansi and Westwood and the work of Michel Wieviorka we could say the same of racism. As the contributions to *Racism*,

Modernity and Identity illustrate, racism is intricately written in the grim prose of the nation, the structuration of which is the same as that of banal nationalism. They are both expressions of the paradox of modernity whose language is always doubled as that of universalism and particularism. Wieviorka has perhaps decisively shown that although the paradox remains, the balance of the two is shifting towards the particular. With the decline of social movements and the rise of communal movements, racism and nationalism are likely to become more prolific, more violent, more political and more totalitarian. Billig's analysis of the very ordinariness by which communal movements such as the nation are manifestly taken for granted as an absent presence, further highlights that it is not in its extreme forms that we should theorize the intricate connections between racism and nationalism, but in the banal, ordinary, commonsensical everyday forms of actions, including expressions.

The ordinariness of the nation, combined with the deviance of race, might be considered as the most significant and powerful explanations of the turbulent formations of racism and nationalism of our times. By tracing racism (and its supplement nationalism) at the node of modernity's ambivalent articulation of the universal and the particular, these publications have posited a critical edge to theorizing the end of modernity, and have produced, and hopefully inspire to further stimulate, innovative and exciting contributions to thinking their supplementary conjunction.

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